

Page Denied

Carlucci Launched CIA Operation

Yemen That Collapsed

By Bob Woodward
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Frank C. Carlucci, who was appointed Tuesday as President Reagan's new national security adviser in the midst of controversy over White House covert operations gone awry, once supervised one of the Central Intelligence Agency's unpublicized failures in the Third World, according to informed sources.

In 1979, as deputy CIA director, Carlucci was urged by President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski,

to set up a top secret CIA paramilitary effort against South Yemen, a Marxist nation on the Arabian peninsula that was threatening to topple neighboring, pro-Western North Yemen, the sources said.

Working with British and Saudi Arabian intelligence agents, Carlucci set the operation in motion to harass South Yemen and thwart any expansionist ambitions. But the plan ended in disaster about a year into the Reagan administration, after Carlucci had become deputy secretary of defense, when a CIA-trained team of about a dozen Yemenis was captured trying

to blow up a bridge in South Yemen. Under torture, team members betrayed their CIA sponsors before they were executed, which ended the operation in 1982, sources said.

The episode provided Carlucci with a firsthand understanding of the hazards of secret undertakings, according to sources who worked with Carlucci at the time. Consequently, the sources said, the new national security adviser supports covert operations but is aware of the potential for disastrous consequences.

Carlucci had no comment yesterday.

The South Yemen operation, according to a number of sources familiar with it, is a case study of CIA covert action and its relation to the political agenda of senior White House officials, in this instance, national security adviser Brzezinski.

In the wake of the furor over National Security Council officials secretly selling arms to Iran and diverting the profits to aid the contra rebels fighting the government of Nicaragua, five senior sources directly involved in the South Yemen affair said the case has a

special meaning in retrospect. As one of the sources put it, "There were unrealistic grand strategic goals that the White House thought could be accomplished through a covert action. And they were trying to fix a lot of things; many, too many, that had nothing to do with South Yemen."

As pieced together by numerous sources, both in and out of the government, the Yemenis became a U.S. national security priority on Feb. 23, 1979, when South Yemen made an unsuccessful three-pronged attack against North Yemen in an effort to seize airstrips and roads in a bid to overthrow the government. Almost immediately, Carter notified Congress that he would ship \$390 million in planes, tanks and other arms to North Yemen.

About the same time, Carter signed an intelligence order, known as a "finding," secretly calling for a study of possible operations against South Yemen. Brzezinski pushed for a covert mission in part because he felt the United States had been too passive in responding to Cuban activities in 1977 and 1978 in Zaire and Somalia.

Although then-CIA Director Stansfield Turner approved the operation, he pronounced it "hare-brained." But others in the agency were more enthusiastic, and wanted to bind the CIA closer to Saudi intelligence with a joint operation. Furthermore, as one source put it, some senior officials in the Carter White House held "almost a 'comity of nations' view that our allies, particularly the conservative ones that distrusted and were suspicious of Carter, needed a joint operation to prove we would be tough."

Because Vice President Walter F. Mondale, while a U.S. senator, had been a member of the Church committee that investigated CIA excesses in the 1970s, Mondale was widely viewed as anti-CIA and Brzezinski believed "it's important for the CIA to see Fritz Mondale take a stand for some sort of paramilitary action," according to sources.

Mondale evidently agreed, because he not only supported the covert operation and military shipments to North Yemen, but also at one point during a White House meeting pounded the table and declared, "We've got to get aid into North Yemen."

Carter signed a second secret finding, authorizing the operation. Partly because of Turner's skepticism and partly because the CIA director was preoccupied at the time with negotiations over the SALT II strategic arms limitation treaty, "Brzezinski wanted Carlucci to run it . . . Brzezinski structured it so he could get Carlucci to do it," one source said.

And so Carlucci traveled overseas to begin setting up the operation. In an effort to maintain security, Carlucci and his assistants from the CIA directorate of operations attempted to decree that the 30 Yemenis trained for the operation were not to know that the agency was behind the effort.

But once the training began, sources said the Yemenis apparently were told in an effort to give the operation credibility by reassuring the operatives that the United States was supporting it.

After the preparations, one team of Yemenis was secretly sent into South Yemen. But the operation ended tragically with capture and confession. A second team that had been "inserted" into South Yemen for a similar paramilitary operation was withdrawn and the operation was ended.

In late March 1982, prosecutors in the South Yemen capital of Aden demanded the death penalty for 13 Yemenis on trial for alleged involvement in a sabotage conspiracy. Eleven members of the group, the prosecution alleged, had been trained by the CIA in neighboring Saudi Arabia with the intent of paving the way for "reactionary and imperialist military intervention" in South Yemen.

Three weeks later, the government in Aden announced that all 13 members of the "gang of subversion" had pleaded guilty to smuggling explosives to blow up oil installations and other targets.

Three had been sentenced to 15-year prison terms, the government added, and 10 had been executed.

Staff researcher Barbara Feinman contributed to this report.

Page Denied

Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied